



## THE NEED FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION AND POLICE TRAINING ON HOW TO INTERACT WITH DIVERSE INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM AND OTHER COGNITIVE-COMMUNICATION DISABILITIES

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Although police brutality against marginalized groups of people is not a new concept, specific data surrounding incidents of individuals with disabilities is scarce. However, since 2016, police departments across the nation have been obligated to report arrest-related fatalities to the U.S. Department of Justice under penalty of loss of ten percent of their federal funding (Swaine, 2016). However, Swaine (2016) reported that even with this requirement, police have been able to avoid the repercussions of losing ten percent of their federal funding because the law has been largely ignored since being reauthorized in 2014. Thanks to a few individuals and organizations, accounts of citizen's violent encounters with police are being documented. For example, Brian Burghart, developed "Fatal Encounters", a growing national search engine of persons killed during interactions with police. Also, the *Guardian's* "The Counted", represents an ongoing effort to document all deaths caused by law enforcement officers. Likewise, *The Washington Post*, has quantified individuals with mental health and intellectual disabilities who were shot and/or killed by police. Similarly, thanks should be given to the Ruderman Foundation and Elinoram Abramov for analyzing the above databases and numerous other resources resulting in an overwhelming numbers of cases being systematically reviewed and compiled to develop a tangible idea of the intersectionality between disability and police violence and how other factors such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status can multiply risks of violent and fatal encounters with law enforcement.

Dr. David M. Perry and Lawrence Carter-Long of the Ruderman Foundation, a disability organization, in their 2016 study of the media coverage of law enforcement use of force on individuals with disabilities, "*found that individuals with disabilities make up a third to a half of all people killed by law enforcement officers*" (Perry & Carter-Long, 2016 p. 4). Specific studies ranged from 21% of cases using police force against people with disabilities

all the way to 81%. Elinoram Abramov, in his 2017 Master's thesis, "An Autistic Man Lives Here Cops No Excuses... Oh Yes He Is Black Too": Cognitive Disability, Race and Police Brutality in the United States, examined and searched through newspaper reports, interviews, medical examiner reports and police statements for keywords surrounding cognitive disabilities and police shootings, and then used *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post's* online databases from 2015-2016 to organize biographical information about the victims. Although his preliminary search revealed that only twenty-three of the roughly two-hundred cases found police using brutal force against individuals with cognitive disabilities, Abramov reported that 41% of those cases were against Black individuals, 32% were White, and 18% were Hispanic. Additionally, nine percent of the cases resulted in lethal outcomes. Notably, just over half of the Black individuals were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and all the White individuals, except one homeless man, had a confirmed ASD or Down Syndrome diagnosis. Abramov (2017) notes that due to disparities in healthcare, differential diagnosis, and age of diagnosis between Black and White Americans, Black individuals are less likely to receive a proper ASD and/or cognitive disability diagnosis, which could lead to the smaller percentage of Black individuals with undiagnosed disabilities in his above findings. These findings have been supported elsewhere (ADDM 2018; Constantino et al. 2020). It is critically important to understand the intersectionality between race, SES, gender, sexuality, and systems of oppression and their relationship to police brutality and lethal force. Many people with disabilities killed by law enforcement are also people of color (Bradley and Katz, 2020). People of color are more likely to be disabled, amongst having other health conditions, due to poor access to healthcare and insurance, and in terms of cognitive disabilities, are more likely to obtain a diagnosis later in life than their White counterparts (Abramov, 2017). Thus, it

is necessary for police forces to work toward recognizing and acknowledging these facts and factors in order to work to dismantle the system of oppression they are a part of.

The issue of police violence against individuals with disabilities, especially Black individuals, I believe, is paramount now. At the height of anti-police brutality movements in 2016, Charles Kinsey, a behavioral therapist, was shot by police for protecting his client, Arnaldo Rios, a 26-year old man with ASD. The police officer tried to justify that Rios was “behaving strangely, did not obey commands, and appeared to be holding a weapon” (Abramov, 2017). That weapon he was carrying, turned out to be a toy truck. After the incident, Rios’ suffered severe trauma and his cognitive and communicative function significantly deteriorated. Today, calls for accountability have not been enough, as many parents of children with autism fear for their children’s safeties and futures, with the news of 23-year-old Elijah McClain’s murder in 2019. Although Elijah was not formally diagnosed with ASD, his story spread throughout the autism community when it resurfaced in 2020. When he was ambushed by three police officers, Elijah was seen walking home while flailing his arms and wearing a ski-type mask for warmth. Some of his last words were, “I’m an introvert. I’m just different. That’s all!” (Tompkins, 2020). Between Neli Latson, a teenager with autism assaulted and arrested for “looking suspicious” sitting outside a library (Vargas, 2020) and Antonio Martinez, a 21-year-old man with Down Syndrome who was illegally detained, beaten, and arrested by a police officer for refusing to stop walking (Perry and Carter-Long, 2016), to a case from my hometown (Virginia Beach, Virginia) about Matthew Rushin, many alarming issues become apparent. In 2019, Matthew, a 22-year-old Black man with ASD, ADHD, traumatic brain injury and a seizure disorder, was sentenced to fifty years in prison for a car accident caused by one of his seizures (Vargas, 2020). When Matthew exited his car, he was approached by an angry man asking if he wanted to kill himself; due to Matthew’s echolalia, he repeated this back, and his words were used against him that night and subsequently in court. Matthew’s disabilities were not considered that night when he was interrogated by the seventeen police officers who had completed training in mental health crises and autism. Both the actions of the police officers and the training they received were unacceptable.

Interactions with police officers can be very problematic for individuals with autism---the condition can lead to sensory overload due to flashing police car lights, shiny badges, loud voices and sirens, which can escalate a situation and lead to poor responses

(Debbaudt, 2002). Autism Speaks provides examples of ways behaviors of individuals with autism may exacerbate interactions with police, such as having an impaired sense of danger, wandering to bodies of traffic or other danger areas, being overwhelmed by police presence, fearing a person in uniform or exhibiting curiosity and reaching for objects/equipment, reacting with “fight” or “flight,” not responding to “stop” or other commands, having delayed speech and language skills, not responding to their name or verbal commands, avoiding eye contact, engaging in repetitive behavior, having epilepsy or seizure disorder, and/or having sensory issues.

As noted by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), speech-language pathologists (SLPs) play a central role in the screening, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of persons with ASD. These roles and activities also include educational services and advocacy (ASHA, 2020). I believe that SLPs can be a valuable resource for law enforcement officials in combination with reallocation of funding toward Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) programs and more specific training in working with individuals with cognitive-communication disorders. For example, in Chicago, where a teenager with autism was shot twice and killed by three Chicago police officers for holding a butter knife, the Chicago Police Department offers a 40-hour program on Crisis Intervention Training, but only 20% of their police officers have received the voluntary training. Two of the three officers involved in the incident testified that they had received autism-related training just once in the six and seventeen years they had been working, respectively (Hurst, 2015). Clinical Psychologist, Genevieve Thornton who was involved with the case said it best, “The police are trying to apply principles for ‘neurotypicals’ that don’t work with an autistic population... you’ve got two people who don’t understand each other.”

Ideally, SLPs in every city could collaborate with their local police departments, and funds could be reallocated to fund training in working with individuals with disabilities and their concurrent cognitive and communication disorders. Collaborations should also be established between SLPs, police and other professionals such as community workers, crisis intervention specialists, social workers, mental health specialists, attorneys, etc. SLPs could design workshops or provide resources for law enforcement departments on how to identify physical and behavioral symptoms and communication characteristics of individuals with different disabilities such as ASD, ADHD, intellectual disabilities, and disorders such as Down Syndrome, etc. and learn appropriate and inappropriate responses. It is also important for po-

lice to start anticipating encountering individuals with disabilities more often. Just because someone has a disability, does not mean they will not be driving a car or be out in public. Law enforcement officers should be able to quickly identify characteristics of different disabilities and disorders and then use appropriate strategies for interaction. If we do not start finding solutions for these recurring nightmares of problems, I fear for the course of our country. The rationale and the need are there; the hard statistics are just buried with the thousands and thousands of victims who were not properly reported on or whose disabilities were not identified correctly. If we have it in our power to help protect marginalized people from harm, that is our responsibility. When people with disabilities and other intersectionalities are killed by the police, why are the people in power not learning from these devastating mistakes, identifying patterns, reaching out for resources, and pushing for change? SLPs have the potential to play a role in resolving a national crisis; not much seems more important at this time.

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